
From the Ancient Grain Goddess to the Virgin Mary
Iconography of the Bake Oven in the Late Middle Ages¹

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In ancient agricultural communities, the worship of the Grain Goddess as divine protection of earthly fecundity was central to all aspects of life. Although various similarities between the Grain Goddess and the Virgin Mary have been recognized, the Virgin's role as the sacred Grain Goddess in medieval spirituality has not yet been fully explored. This paper traces the representation of the Grain Goddess from the Upper Paleolithic period,² and considers hidden allusions to the power of the Divine Feminine principle as the life-giving vessel and investigates the late medieval iconography of the Grain Goddess and the "mystical oven," in an attempt to illuminate the concept of the Virgin Mary as the bearer and baker of the Living Bread.

The Prehistoric Grain Goddess

Symbols representing the Grain Goddess' fertility appear from the Upper Paleolithic period. Her pregnant body was associated with the fecundity of the seeded earth and all its creatures, while her dark body was considered the cave-temple. At the beginning of the Neolithic period, this deity was "transformed into an agricultural goddess, the progenitor and protectrice of all fruits of the harvest, but especially grain and bread"³ Numerous statuettes of the Grain Goddess depict a pregnant figure whose belly is decorated with

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² The last stage of the paleolithic, beginning c. 40,000-38,000 B.C. and lasting for some 30,000 years.

³ Marija Gimbutus, *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991, p.228

lozenges and dots. The dots might represent the seed inside the womb or field, while the lozenges symbolize the fertile field. The early agrarian people sow the seed in the womb of the Grain Goddess, harvest it as the fruit of her body, and use it in making bread.

In the Neolithic period, special altars were built for her next to the bread ovens as we see in the shrine of Sabatinvka.⁴ Furthermore, the prehistoric bread oven in the shrines was considered an incarnation of the Grain Mother. Anthropomorphized miniature models of ovens are found in the Vinca site (Fig. 1). This figure attests to the identification of the bread oven with the Grain Goddess, the giver of bread. Thus, from prehistoric times, the woman's body was envisioned both as the fertile field and the mystical oven," in which life-sustaining bread was produced.

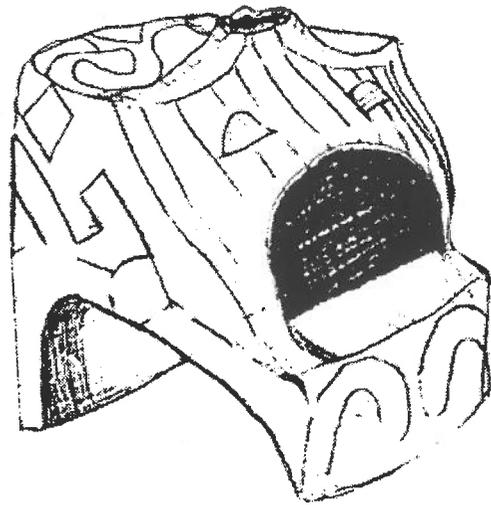


Figure 1

Modification of the dominant mother-goddess religion occurred during the fifth millennium B.C., when the nomadic herders began to move from the Eurasian steppe into the eastern Mediterranean area. Although the invasion marked the patriarchalization of agrarian agriculture, the concept of the Grain Goddess as the

⁴ Shrine from Sabatinvka dating from the first half of the 5th mill. B.C. is sketched in Gimbutas, p. 261, fig. 7-59.

life-producing principle was prevalent in ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions, as seen in the worship of Inanna, Ishtar, Isis and Demeter.

Grain Goddess: Pagan and Christian

During the early Middle Ages, however, the churchmen regarded the idea of the Grain-Goddess with opprobrium. Nevertheless, reluctant to abandon an efficacious mythic being, early medieval peasants invented new forms of the goddess, sometimes syncretizing her with Christian female saints and frequently with the Virgin Mary. Despite centuries of hostility by organized Christianity, the role of the Grain Goddess as symbol of nurture and protection survived, and it prevailed in the medieval imagination as a result of both visual and literary representations of the Virgin Mary.

Symbolization of Grain

In exploring the Virgin's role as the Grain Goddess in a Christian context, we must consider the theological symbolism of grain. In the Middle Ages, the symbolism is integrated in the fruitful and sacrificial death of the grain articulated in a parable in John 12:24, which unveils the core of Christianity: "Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." In iconography, ears of grain symbolize the bread — one of the elements of the Holy Eucharist, the body of Christ. In the late Middle Ages, many paintings depicted the symbolic relationship between Christ and grain. An illustration of the medieval concept of Christ as grain was produced in the studio of Friedrich Herlin in 1469. The painting, now in the Stadtmuseum, Nördlingen, depicts a stalk of wheat growing from the womb in Christ's foot. The Virgin as the Grain Mother is emblematically depicted in the woodblock print known as "The Madonna of the Sheaves." The sheaves decorating her gown symbolize her role as the co-redemptrix who conceives Christ and nourishes the grain of salvation.

Grain symbolism is tightly interwoven in the web of Marian symbolism pertaining to the Incarnation. At the moment of the Annunciation, the Virgin becomes the sacred vessel in whose womb the Bread of Life is conceived and baked. The symbolism of grain and bread can be traced back to pre-Christian times. K. Kerényi

discusses the nature of grain hidden in the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter." He states that "the grain expressed an inexpressible divine reality.⁵ It symbolizes the disappearance of life through death and the resurrection-like return. The strange conduct of Demeter as a nurse of the child Demophoon implies the fate of the grain. Every night Demeter lays the child in the fire to obtain immortality for her charge.⁶ Demeter treats him as though he were grain. The fate of the grain is evident: "Whether parched or baked as bread, death by fire is the fate of the grain⁷. Nevertheless, every sort of grain is eternal. Immortality, which is one of Demeter's gifts, is symbolized in the immortal aspect of the grain.

Symbolization of the Womb

In Christian symbolism, the womb takes on a new meaning as the pure belly as vessel. Erich Neumann states that "the woman is the Lady of transformation"⁸ and that the vessel character of the belly retains "the creative aspect of the uterus and potentiality of transformation"⁹. In this context, the vessel of magical transformation is identified with the womb of the Mother. Her womb is "the caldron of incarnation, birth and rebirth", while the Virgin's womb is sacral, life-transforming vessel.¹⁰ They often depict the vessel placed next to the Virgin to signify that the vessel is the Virgin herself and that she bears the host with the name of the divine Son.

⁵ C.G. Jung and K. Kérenyi. *Essays on a Science of Methodology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949. p. 117.

⁶ The attempt and failure of the goddess to render a human child immortal by burning him in the fire parallels the conduct of Isis as the nurse of Queen Astarte's child.

⁷ Jung and Kérenyi, *op. cit.* p. 116.

⁸ Erich Neumann *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 287.

Further examination of the vessel symbolism reveals the intense connection between bread and the Incarnation. With the use of fire, the vessel is transformed into the bake oven, which is linked to the mysteries of agriculture — bread made of grain. The transformation of grain into bread, as well as the making and baking of clay vessels, may have been the invention of women. These activities reflect the power of the goddess to nourish, form and transform life. The food-giving and food-transforming aspect of the Feminine is more pronounced in the symbolic identity of the baking oven and of bread itself. The connection between the transformative aspect of the oven and that of the womb is evident. According to an old proverb, "The oven is the mother." Medieval embryology maintains that the mother was an oven or a vessel in which the foetus was cooked. The birth of bread recalls the birth of Christ, who, like bread, is taken from the mystical oven of the virginal womb.

Indeed, Christ is compared to the bread baked in the virginal womb, in the Franciscan John Ryman's carol of c. 1492, which Greene edits:

In virgynr Mary this brede was bake
Whenne criste of her manhoode did take,
For of all synne mankynde to make,
Ete ye it so ye be [not dede]¹¹

The Book of Vices and Virtues also makes the connection between oven and bread and praises the Virgin, who is the bread-maker:

P. Tis to seye þat a man or a woman schal record swetliche and in smale peces be many smale þouztes ak þe godnesses of oure lord and all þat Ihesu Crist suffrid for vs...

And al þat doþ þe verue of þis bred, for þat is þe bred þat confortep and strenkþep þe herte... þis bred we clepem oure for it was made of our deuzh. Blessed be þilke good womman þat leide forþ þe flour, þat was þe virgyne Marie.¹²

¹¹ R.L. Greene, ed. *The Early English Carol*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935. See p. 216.

¹² W.N. Francis, ed. *The Book of Vices and Virtues*. EETE OS 217. London: Oxford UP, 1942. pp 109-10.

Medieval historians long interpreted bread as the fruit of the Virgin's womb. Celebrating the pure grain nourished in the virginal womb, Hildegard of Bingen, illuminates the Virgin's character as the source of the eucharistic body:

So the heavens rained dew upon the grass
and the whole world exulted,
for her womb brought forth wheat,
for the birds of heaven made their nests in it.¹³

Developing further the theme of fertility without sexuality, Hildegard, in Fragment IV, described the Virgin's conception as the one "kindled" by the Holy Spirit: "The warmth of a man kindles a woman to conceive. Therefore the warmth of the living and unquenchable fire came to kindle the Virgin and make her fertile"¹⁴ Although Hildegard does not connect the virgin's womb with an oven, her figures are based on the ancient transformative aspect of the Archetypical Feminine as vessel.

Thomas Aquinas clearly identified the bake-oven with the Virgin. He expounds: "The bread signifies Christ who is the living bread... He was like perfect bread after he assumed human nature, baked in the fire, i.e., formed by the Holy Spirit in the earth of the virginal womb".¹⁵ Pierre de Celles claims that "the bake oven is the Virgin's womb, the fire is the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the bread is the Incarnation of the God's Son"¹⁶.

A similar interpretation is found in the moralization of Leviticus 2-4, produced in Paris during the third decade of the thirteenth century. The moralization depicts a scene of Jews putting sacrificial

¹³ Hildegard of Bingen *Scivias*, ed. Adelgundis Führkötter, CCCM vols. 43-43. Turnout, 1978. V. II 6.26 p. 255. And Barbara Newman. *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987. I have used Barbara Newman's translations for Hildegard's texts.

¹⁴ Bingen. *Ibid.* IV. 6-7, p. 68.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologia* 1a, 2ae. Q. 102, Art. 3.

¹⁶ Pierre de Celles, *Liber de Panibus*, PL 202, ed. Col. 959, 1017-22.

loaves into an altar-hearth in the form of an oven (Fig. 2). Just below this scene, there is an unusual annunciation in which the Virgin holds the Infant Christ. The adjacent commentary states that "the Jews' placing unleavened bread into the oven to bake the fire signifies God's placing his Son in the womb of the Virgin".¹⁷ A marginal painting in the *Book of Hours* by the Rohan Master depicts the Annunciation scene in which the Son, in the form of an infant, naked but haloed, descends from the sky toward the Virgin. Her left hand rests on a baker's tray, stressing her role as a baker of the heavenly bread (Fig. 3).

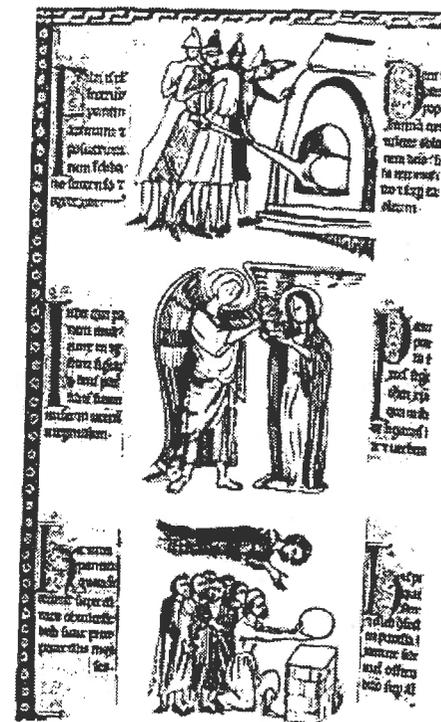


Figure 2

¹⁷ The Latin text accompanying the Oxford Bodleian Library MS 270b, fol. 59r: "filii Israel feceru(n)t panem azimum et posuerunt eum I(n) clibano succenso et coxerunt. Judei qui panem miserunt in ignem fig(u)ra(n)t q(uod) deus pat(er) filiu(m) suum misit in uteru(m) virginalem." See also Carra Ferguson O'Meara's article, "In the Hearth of the Virginal Womb: The Iconography of the Holocaust in Late Medieval Art," *Art Bulletin* 63 (1981): 79.



Figure 3

Symbolizing the Fireplace

The analogy between the fireplace and the Virgin's womb appears in several early Netherlandish paintings. The fireplace in the Master of Flemalle's Merod Altarpiece represents the hearth-womb symbolism. In the "Madonna and Child before a Firescreen," two columns of a fireplace are barely visible in the darkness of the background. In the context of Aquinas' exegesis, the fireplace signifies the mystical oven in her body. The Virgin presents the Infant in front of the fireplace, suggesting a parallel between Christ and bread. Thus the nursing Madonna serves as both provider of food to her Son and as provider of Jesus as heavenly food to all Christians, evoking the nurturing power of the ancient Grain Goddess.

Grain, Bread and the Eucharist

In Christianity, the symbolic identity of grain and bread constitutes the mystical basis of the theology of transubstantiation in the Eucharist. Christ is the victim, the seed of wheat. At the same time, He embodies the continual power of renewal in the wheat, which is ritualized in the form of the Eucharist. At the Last Supper, Christ uses bread as both the symbol of his sacrifice upon the Cross and the memorial of his Redemption. A Swabian altarpiece from Ulm illustrates the so-called "mystical mill": it shows the Virgin pouring wheat into a funnel, from which emerge both the Christ Child and the host (Fig. 4). The grain could become bread only by being crushed and tortured by those men whom it would feed. The fate of the grain from the womb of the earth to the mill, and then to the oven, as it is made into bread, is parallel to the sacrifice and the redemption of Christ, who was incarnated in the womb of the Virgin Mary.



Figure 4

The Eucharist symbolizes the Crucifixion, Jesus' Sacrifice on behalf of humanity. Thomas Aquinas argues that the reenactment of the Crucifixion is the divinely ordained fulfillment of all Hebrew burned offerings.¹⁸ From a typological point of view, the Israelites' putting sacramental bread onto the grill of an altar-hearth to be baked by fire foreshadows the nailing of Christ to the Cross. At the Incarnation, Christ is baked in the mystical oven of the virginal womb. Furthermore, as Aquinas expounds, Christ is "baked again in a pan by the toil which he suffered in the world and consumed by the fire on the cross as on a grate"¹⁹ to redeem humanity from the state of sinfulness resulting from the Fall.

The Virgin and the Grain Goddess

The heavenly grain is baked into bread in the hearth of the virginal womb. The grain is ground in the mill to be eaten by the faithful in the form of the Eucharist. The heavenly bread is burned again on the cross. Like the grain, the suffering Christ dies, but is mystically resurrected, thereby redeeming the sinfulness of humanity. The Virgin Mary, in her role as vehicle and receptacle of the Incarnation, serves as the sacral vessel that produces the Bread of Life in the mystical oven. She is assimilated with the Grain Goddess venerated since the beginning of civilization, yet her mystical character in Christian imagery transforms the earthly natural cycle and elevates it to a higher and spiritual plane. The spiritual aspect of the Virgin's transformative character "leads through suffering and death, sacrifice and annihilation, to renewal, rebirth and immortality".²⁰ The Virgin Mary as successor to the Grain Goddess is ultimately responsible for nourishing humanity, and she ushers in salvation. The continuing power of the Grain Goddess prevailed and the Virgin's role in bringing forth the sacrificial grain and bread to humanity is thus made manifest.

¹⁸ See Aquinas, *op. cit.* 1a, 2ae, Q. 102, art. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 1a, 2ae, Q.1021 art. 3.

²⁰ Neumann *op. cit.* p.291.

The analogy between the Bake Oven and the Virgin's womb in popular piety helps to explain, therefore, the frequency of bake ovens on misericords.

Illustrations

Fig 1. Miniature model of an oven with anthropomorphic features. Vinča, 5000-4500 BC, sketched by Miwako Nomura. See Marija Gimbutas' *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) p. 148, figure 229 for the original drawing.

Fig 2. "Moralization of Leviticus 2:4" *Bible Moralisée*. Oxford: Bodleian, ms 270b, fol 59r., sketched by Miwako Nomura.

Fig. 3. *Hours of the Rohan Master*. Prayers of Intercession, Marginal Painting, Bible moralisée, fol. 212, c. 1425, sketched by Miwako Nomura.

Fig. 4. Altarpiece of the Mystical Mill, central panel. c. 1440. By permission of Ulmer Museum - Ulm, Germany.



Man Blows Windmill

Musée national du Moyen Âge